Pyramid Scheme
a billstan zine

GO FOR IT,
CIPHER!

--:--

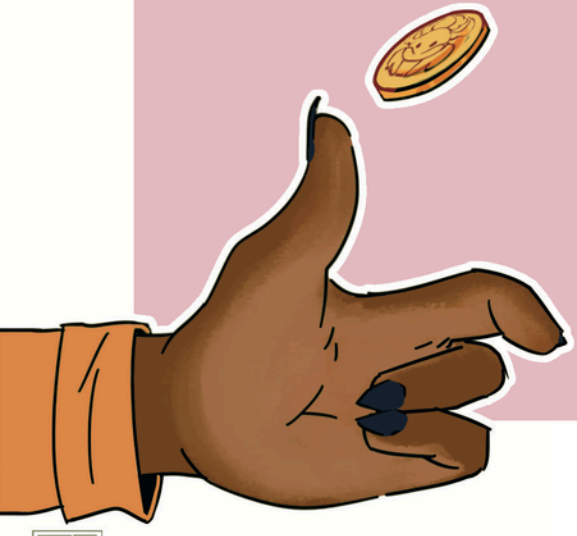
uh oh!! careful now, you might start a [illegible] !

NEXT PIECE

WARNING: Deleting parts may result in file corruption.
This action is irreversible.

Art and story by Niq

COIN TOSS



Afraid of what lies beyond; Bill Cipher seeks out the taste of death in the hands of Stanley Pines once more.

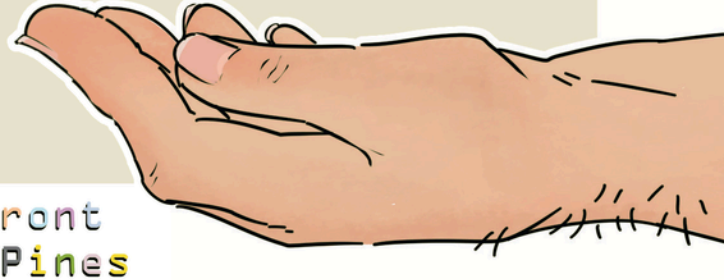
△ ⊣⍀⍜⍜⌰⍀⍜⍙⍙⍜⍀ ⍀⍜⍙⍙⍜⍀ ⍜⍀⍜⍙⍙⍜⍀ ⍜⍀⍜⍙⍙⍜⍀ ⍜

I'm sorry.
I'm not like Ford.
I'm no genius.
Tell me, how would I know?

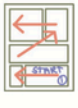
Art and story by Niq

COIN TOSS

"Would this be the last time I can see you?"



The man infront of Stanley Pines stays silent.



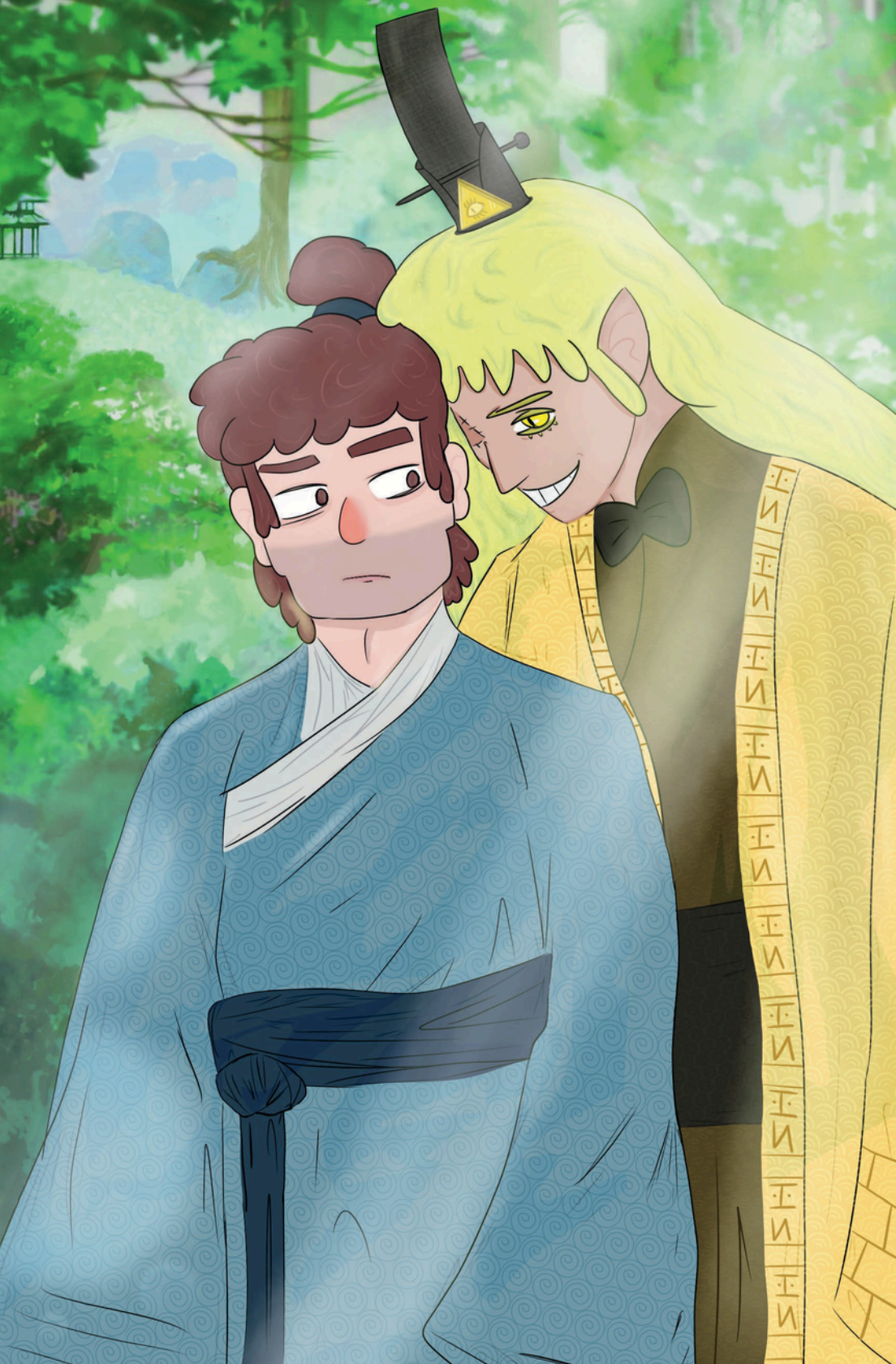
You are my way of life
I'll never let you go

Kyun
Karma

AAAAAAAAAA

BRASS RED CLOWNS

@Moss_and_Soap on Twitter



HAPPY
ANNIVERSARY
I try to make SHANKLIN!
Look more like a RAT
Pitt

YOU PROMISED SIXER TO NOT SMOKE ANYMORE.
YES, JUST NOT INFRONT OF HIM.
STAN 'O WAR II
...
I'M NOT SURE HE SPECI-FIED THAT.
MEH, HE DOESN'T NEED TO KNOW.
ANY WAY, WHY DID YA WANNA TALK HERE?
FUHH

SIGH
I AM GOING TO BE REIN-CARNATED, STAN.
HOLY SMOKES

YOU'RE THE FIRST I'M TELLING.
HOW COME?
"PART OF MY MEMORIES ARE IN YOUR BRAIN."
"SOME OF YOUR PAST IS IN MY BRAIN TOO."
WE DON'T HAVE ENOUGH TIME TO HAVE OUR DAILY CATCH UP ABOUT THE FUCKED UP THINGS WE DID IN OUR LIFE.
I THOUGHT IT'LL BE NICE YOU KNOW YOU'RE GONNA LOSE A PART OF YOU SOON.
. . . .
WHEN IS THE AXOLOTL GONNA PICK YOU UP?
FUHH

IN THREE DAYS.
...
ARE YOU READY?
I'M NOT SURE -
OH BILL ...
I KNEW MY SENTENCE FROM MY FIRST DAY IN THE THERAPRISM.
BUT I'M STILL NOT READY TO DIE.

THANKS.
I'D BE READY TO HAVE A 3 DAY LONG CONVERSATION WITH YOU.
FOR REAL?
SURE BILL.
YEAH OK.
HUF

. . . . .
THOUGH I'M DOING IT FOR ME, RIGHT? NOT FOR YA.
HAHA! YEAH, SURE.
HEY! HAHA!
OKAY, I'M DONE BEING VULNERABLE, YOUR TURN!
SO, THERE WAS THIS TIME IN TIJUA-NA-
SHUT UP, YOU ALREADY TOLD THIS ONE.

STANLEY STANLEY STANLEY STANLEY
STANLEY STANLEY STANLEY STANLEY
STANLEY STANLEY STANLEY STANLEY
STANLEY STANLEY STANLEY STANLEY
STANLEY STANLEY STANLEY STANLEY
EBSGLOC

WE'LL MEET AGAIN
DINAGUAN

A heavenly
break
with
Pitt
Cola

KEEP ON RUNNING
THE WELL
Stanley 1962

BURNED
INTO MY
MIND

By the foolish
will of
Fate
our
Souls make

A Lamb Led To Slaughter

In the forest of Gravity Falls, the pine trees seemed to speak to you.

Under the pure white light of the moon, the only illumination within the dark, the branches of the trees seemed to come to life, still and numerous. The dark green shoots upon them hardly moved, weighed down by pounds of snow, trailing themselves over whoever walked through them. The bark was irregular and textured, rising out in odd bumps and ridges, each unique in its own way, like human skin. You'd never find the exact same kind.

It was then that this woman walked through the forest, the sharp click of her heels silenced within the vastness of the snow, sinking in with each step. She didn't swear or drag her feet through the snow, opting to blink placidly with a slight smile on her face, target set in sight; Like a predator tracking down its prey, finally wearing it down after days of chasing. Though she couldn't have been the only one in this forest.

The trees had slitted eyes on them, thin, deadly, and constant, so protected by their rigid bark, as numerous as the stars, something unique to the clear Oregon sky. They trailed over her skin, carving sharp white lines. Nevertheless, she gripped her purse evenly and continued, unbothered by the snow pooling over her feet, soaking her stockings.

And after a few minutes, she came across a pond surrounded by white snow, small in size, with almost a fairytale-like quality to it.

The ice was thick over it, a few inches in depth, just a tad too thin for iceskating. She paused when she reached the edge of it, the tips of her heels tapping against the glass. She could have gone around it... *But where's the fun in that?* She smiled at the thought, letting the bag fall from her hand, heedless of the fragile contents, and began to tug at the buttons of her jacket, nearly ripping them off with the force. Next came her shirt, pulled from her skirt, and thrown on the snow just like the bag, the latter shucked off as well. Her heels were the only thing treated with a modicum of respect, primly stepped out of where they stood. Stumbling onto the ice, reveling in the near-instant burning feeling of the cold, she reached behind her to tug at the hooks of her bra, bending backwards to reach it. “Feels like it's gonna kill me.” She growled, successfully unhooking and tossing it on the ice, loud cracks forming under her feet, rapidly spreading across like a fractured bone. At the sight, she raised her foot, slamming it down again and again until it dipped under her, and she slipped underneath the ice before she could react, her ensuing cheer cut short when she disappeared under the water with a splash.

Underneath, the world turned quiet, black and clear. She could only open her eyes for a few seconds, only to catch faint glimpses of the water around her. Her nose burned where the water forced itself in, and she coughed instinctively within it, only succeeding in swallowing more water than she could retain. Almost immediately, she began to drown, her throat flexing wildly around nothing, her delicate hands clawing at her own throat with that delicious ache in her lungs, air bubbles heading towards the top.

The coldness of the water only added to the sensation, diminishing the heat her body generated as it kicked out wildly, trying to escape the feeling. And when it began to border the edge of too much, she went limp, letting herself be lifted to the surface, hands grasping at the opening, breaking up the slush of ice that had begun to reform. With strength she didn't normally possess, she pulled herself up and out, sitting on the edge of a snow-covered bank, gasping for air. Her mouth fell open, and she laughed maniacally, the sound echoing throughout from her shaking, though whether from fear or cold was unknown. Both were equally welcome.

And she forced herself to her feet, shaking her head like a soaked dog, knees shaking under her weight, stiff with the cold. Tears streamed down her face as she pulled on her clothes messily, leaving her shirt untucked within her skirt, and the jacket just barely buttoned. She stepped into her heels, stumbling around and towards the other side, like she had been heading originally.

In the forest of Gravity Falls, shrouded in the pine trees and hidden under the night, mistakes came to die.

~~~~~~~~~~

Stanley Filbrick Pines, now known as Stanford Filbrick Pines, leaned over the grimy sink within the Cabin, staring into the mirror, pressing at different parts of his face. The lightbulb was busted, the yellow light of it making the room look dirtier than it was, the occasional flicker of it jarring him slightly.
~~~~~~~~~~

He looked at the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, at the unshaven stubble he now sported, hair greasy and uncombed. He swallowed, Ford's face coming to mind as he looked in the mirror, and he forced the image of his brother out of his head, the most recent memory of him involving him shaking and trembling, eyes exhausted and thin, as he gave his Journal to him, now abandoned in the basement of the Cabin. *The basement*. He groaned, hands gripping at his long brown locks and tugging, closing his eyes against the familiar ones in the unwashed glass.

He swayed where he stood, bracing himself against the porcelain, the dizziness the biggest indicator of his gradually worsening hangover. He'd given up on reading Ford's textbooks the night before, the words passing by his eyes, but not retaining. His brand ached at the thought, almost as if chaining him to the room. As a result, he'd ended up drinking himself into a stupor, passing out on the recliner, the vending machine slammed shut behind him. Empty bottles and a rising feeling of nausea had led him to the bathroom, where he now stood.

There's a knock at the door, and the man ignored it, not willing to socialize with whoever came for his brother, opting to stew in his own misery. Then the knocking got louder, much more adamant, and he paused, blinking. *Shit. Have they followed me here, too? I faked my death! Don't tell me they're here to shake down Ford in my place.* His hands traveled to the back of his waistband, lifting up his shirt to reveal a handgun, warmed by his body heat.

He curled his right hand around the handle, finger teasing the trigger as he stepped out, body at an angle, stepping slowly towards the door. Ford didn't have any peepholes, so he had to be quick about it.

He threw the door open without any fanfare, wedging a foot in the gap, but stopped himself, hand immediately tearing itself away from his gun and resting on the doorjamb. His eyes widened, and he blinked rapidly, feeling as if he was imagining the whole thing. This wasn't who he expected.

Rather then a group of sleazy, burly men, stinking of beer and cigarettes, there stood a woman, a slight petite thing, about eye level with Stan's shoulders. The first thing the conman noticed was her pretty face, almost heart-shaped, with a sharp chin that tightened the skin on her cheeks. She couldn't have been older than twenty. Her almond-shaped eyes were bright, her pupils dark and bottomless, swallowing up the meager light in their depth; Sharp in an animalistic way, especially when they narrowed. But she was completely drenched, her makeup running from her eyes in great black rivulets, as though she had jumped in a lake. Her slim figure, with dainty shoulders that seemed so fragile within her suit jacket, seemed even more delicate with the soaking fabric, hugging her body. Her slicked-down hair fell just past her shoulder, drying in the cold weather, the beginnings of gentle blonde curls appearing to frame her face in the most alluring look, complete with black highlights.

At the sight of Stan, she threw herself into his chest, forcing the door open with her weight.

Her arms folded into his chest, and she curled into his body, pressing her face flat against his chest, crying in a very exaggerated manner, her words muffled in his shirt. “H-How could you, Fordsy!” She sobbed, definitely smearing black across the white fabric. “How could you break up with me like that?”

Stan’s hands hovered over her trembling back, fumbling over his next course of action, shrinking away slightly, though she followed him, pressing closer. Should he touch her? Could he touch her? *How’d a guy like Ford lock down a bombshell like her?* Gently, he gripped her shoulders, pulling her away from him. The woman blinked at him innocently, eyes red-rimmed from her tears. “Hey, doll, I’m sorry...” He mentally slapped himself immediately. Ford wouldn't have given her a nickname and would have called her by her full name, as unromantic as that was. But Stan didn't know her name, much less who she was. “You gotta go.”

She stuck her lips out, batting her eyes at him in a way that made his chest twist. “But I’m so cold, Fordsy. Won't you let a gal come inside to warm up a bit?”

And Stan realized that she did feel cold, pressed up against his hot chest. Frigid, even. As soon as the thought passed through, the small body within his grasp began to shiver, tensing up as though to retain body head. Her lips, which Stan had assumed were tinged a lovely pink, were rapidly turning gray, bordering on blue. The man let go of her and lifted up her hand, looking at the perfectly manicured nails, the fingers upon which they rested on turning pale.

The woman let a quick smile flash across her face, unbeknownst to the other man, and forced herself in as though she owned the place.

She looked over her shoulder, rolling her neck back. “Aren’t you gonna take my coat?” Stan raised an eyebrow, but obeyed her nonetheless, taking the edges of it and gently pulling it off her body. She must’ve really turned Ford into a gentleman if he was taking her coat when she walked in. But this only revealed her light brown skin, smooth and damp with the weather, the sheer fabric of her shirt completely soaked, sticking to the dips of her back. The conman forced his eyes away. This was Ford’s girlfriend, not his, even though he had to play his role. He shouldn’t let himself fall into this.

She stepped over the mess within the house with the intimate knowledge of someone who’d been here several times, tiptoeing over some fragile pieces, but choosing to kick some away. Stan winced when they shattered across amongst the mess. “Sorry about the mess.”

“Apologizing already?” She laughed, lifting the hem of her skirt as she kneeled on the ground, pushing away some books as she made a space for herself. “That’s a good look for you. You should do it more often, don’t ya think?”

Irritation at her words boiled under Stan’s skin, but he snapped his mouth shut before he could retort with something nasty. She wasn’t talking to him, but his twin brother. He needed to remember this. “I’ve been thinking about it. What does your name mean?”

This was a trick he used every time he forgot the name of the girl he was with. It had 50/50 odds of him actually finding out her name or getting slapped and dumped.

“Who knows? I don’t. Sure sounds good, though. Bill. Nice and simple, rolls off the tongue.”

“Bill?” Stan questioned, squinting at the words. That sounded like a guy’s name. Leave it to Ford to find girls as strange as him.

“Short for Billie, don't act dense, tough guy!” Bill snapped, her words turning harsh and scolding at the drop of a hat, face twisted up. Though, she cooled just as quickly, her features smoothing out as she stretched out across the floor, laying on her side as she reached out, rummaging within a pile of trash within the floor, her skirt riding up her thighs when she gave a triumphant hum, sitting back up, holding something in her hand. She stood on her knees, tottering closer to Stan, who had taken to sitting on the floor across from her. He looked up at her teeth, glinting sharply as she placed something on his head, missing completely when it fell over his eyes. He took a hand and adjusted it, balancing on the top of his head, feeling out its shape with a hand. “You’ll grow into it soon enough, bruiser.” She cooed, cackling at her own joke.

Stan just stared at her face, slightly bewildered. What was she talking about? Though he couldn't help the way he stared at the corners of her mouth, at the way her lips stretched over her teeth, tinged a slight yellow. Maybe she was a smoker. Then they’d have that in common.

But she fell back to the ground a bit hard, folding her knees up, reaching behind her to shake the handbag she had brought with her, something Stan had forgotten about. He rubbed at his eyes. He really needed to head to bed. That bag could have anything. A gun. A knife. He should have kept his eyes on it the whole time. Bill reached into the handbag, unzipping it and reaching in to pull a bottle of... Whiskey?

Wine's not his style, the demon thought to herself, tossing the bag away and biting down on the cap, unscrewing it with a pop. She spat the cork away from her and took a long sip, relishing the burn against her throat when she passed it to him, wiping a stray drip with the tip of her finger. *Something hard and fast, like whiskey. He isn't Sixer.* "It's a gift, from yours truly! It's all my fault, *honey.*" He insisted, laying it on sugar-sweet, like fresh glaze.

And Stan eyed the bottle, the way her fingers gripped the neck, shaking the orange-brown liquid sloshed inside temptingly. He imagined the way it would scorch his throat, the burn familiar, a constant in his life on the road. He could always count on alcohol to get him through the night, to dull the pain, wrapping his head in the warmest cotton. Any night felt warm when he was buzzed enough. And he wanted that buzz again, the previous night a forgotten memory already. So he reached out, let his fingers brush hers, and threw his head back, greedily swallowing down as much as he could, already high as it sloshed in his empty stomach. He'd forget about this the next morning, anyway.

He sighed at the feeling, passing the bottle back to her. .

She took much more dainty sips, eyes burning holes into Stan's skin as she stared, already feeling tipsy. She must've drunk only half of much as him! *Retinal scanner,* she reminded herself, passing the bottle back in the silence. *I'm here for the scanner. Fordsy's twin would have the same eyes.* But she regarded him much more carefully now, relaxed enough with the alcohol in her system. Funny how that worked. *So this was the guy he'd been hung up over for all these years? Not much to look at, if I'm honest.* She gave a decisive sniff, biting at her nail, stretching out a stocking-clad leg to brush against his knee. *Let's see if he amuses me the same way he did.*

Stan had slumped a bit since then, head lolling on the cushions of the couch, rubbing his cheek against the itchy fabric. His hair was tangled horribly, and Bill resisted the urge to tug at it as she crawled closer, settling herself comfortably against his warmth. Stan's eyes shot open, and he stared at her, mouth hanging open a bit dumbly, hands gripping the cushions.

Bill smirked at the sight and held his face, rubbing her thumbs against his cheeks sweetly. She didn't miss the way he leaned into her grip, head lolling slightly, eyes half-closed, and she coaxed him forward. She was dreadfully bored these days and was in *dire* need of entertainment. *What'll he do now?*

Strong hands gripped Bill's hand, and before she could shift back, pulled her in close to press her flush against his side, letting his lips slot against hers. Stan sighed into the kiss, like it was the balm to his ache, and licked at her lipstick, smearing it against her own messily.

Bill's nails sank into his shoulder, letting out a giggle that was swallowed up as she let him take control.... *just as she suspected*.

But Stan pushed her away roughly, turning his head away as he panted, gasping for air through his covered mouth, tightly clenched within his own fingers. Bill remained next to him, a bit confused, and tugged at the man's shoulder, trying to coax him back into the kiss. Temptation. He pressed her hand away, glancing at her with desperate, watery eyes, and turned away from her again. "I shouldn't be doin' this. This is wrong."

Bill cocked her head, playing dumb on purpose. She knew why he stopped. "Whaddya mean?"

"I'm not *Ford*." Stan spat, the words harsh and forceful, as though they were stuck to his throat like tar, like it was painful to say them. "He had a twin brother, me. I shouldn't have done that. 'm sorry." The words slipped out before he could stop himself, made easy with the alcohol. If only things were so easy between him and his brother.

But Bill smiled in that damning way, the way the Devil did when he brought sinners to hell. She must've been the Devil when she pulled him close, guided his face to her neck, and stroked at his hair in the most saccharine way, coiling the strands in her fingers, giving them a light tug. "I know, Fez." She didn't say anything when she felt hot tears glide down her neck, soaking into her thin shirt. The fabric would be ruined by the end of tonight.

But there was a blunt pressure at the base of the conman's head, as if someone jammed two fingers into them roughly, and he was falling forward into the warm body in front of him, which fit so easily into his arms, eyes falling shut into the most peaceful sleep he'd had in a long, long while. It felt like coming home, like falling into soft sheets and still air. He didn't want to let go, even when his vision turned black.

This turned out to be an issue for Bill, who needed to get both of them to the vending machine. She was loopy from the whiskey herself, knock-kneed, but still bent down to throw a heavy arm over her shoulder, letting out a loud groan as she dragged the limp body over, knocking over every pile of trash in their way. The few feet to the vending machine left her damp with a sheen of sweat, and she wiped at her forehead, staring at the wetness on her hands. Human functions were so strange.

She refocused herself and pressed in the code, shifting the man's weight to lean on her back as she pried an eye open, waiting impatiently as it stayed long enough for the scanner's laser to glide over it, letting out a confirming beep as the door slid open. She dropped Stan instantly, as though he were a sack of potatoes, leaving him cold on the ground like a doorstop as she bounded down the stairs, supporting herself with the handlebar.

She turned the corner to a disorganized desk, a well-known sight even amongst her Mindscape. She ignored the loose papers, shut down machines, and flashing buttons as her eyes zeroed in on the infamous Journal, the start and end to all her problems.

She grasped it, raising it to the air as though it were a trophy, and to her, it really was. All this time, all this *effort*, just to return this to her hands. It felt anticlimactic, in a way. She almost thought it would have been harder to get it.

However, the real issue only started now. She somehow needed to find Fordsy across the multiverse, drag him back to his home world, and somehow convince him to resume portal production. If there was any worry in her mind, she suppressed the thought, running her fingers across the spine of the book as she thought. *He's a resourceful little guy. If anyone could find a way to survive, it would be him.* But for how long? Time was a precious resource, and until she found a way to control it, it was also a ball and chain to her human's ankle. And until she found *him*, it was also an hourglass that never stopped. It'd take forever if she went looking for him, and even longer if he was trying to hide himself.

She sighed, rubbing at her temples. She'd convinced him to get that tattoo around his neck in place of a collar for this exact reason. Let's hope nobody was stupid enough to aid him. Though if he came back on his hands and knees, *maybe* she'd be willing to forgive him. But she needed to open the portal first, both for him and for herself.

So she gave the equipment her own assessment, forgetting about the human upstairs as she rushed around, starting up some of the machines with her own numbers, the schematics as clear as a Polaroid in her head.

Still, no matter how much she tried, nothing would stay open, the hopeful flashes of light fizzling out just as fast. Bill let out a frustrated groan, slamming her fists on the table as she cursed out anyone she could think of. She cursed Ford, his stupid hillbilly third wheel, the Axoltol, Everything!

Ford cost him this dimension. He had one job: to open the portal, and he couldn't do it. What a useless mutt!

But a moan came from upstairs, the scraping of something heavy against the wood, and it was like a lightbulb lit in her head, technicolor patterns flashing in front of her. She had a plan, and it was a great one, too. Who was she if not resourceful? So she slicked her hair back, teasing the tangles out with her fingers, and hiked her shirt down, giving a clear view of whoever looked at her chest. She tugged her skirt up, pulling down the stockings slightly. Lastly, she leaned forward to peer into the protective glass, seeing the portal if she focused, seeing her own face reflected back, and chose to wipe off the remaining smears of her makeup, forcing herself to smile in a winning way, the way that got humans to do anything for her.

Stan supported his aching head with a hand, pinching from the weird angle he fell into at the vending machine door. There were faint noises coming from downstairs, and against his better judgment, he followed their source, shifting his weight on the creaky steps. He froze at the corner, staring at the sight of Bill perched on the table, legs crossed femininely, chest thrown out, and head cocked flirtatiously.

She sighed sweetly, and the sound was gentle against his skin, burning hot at the sight. She beckoned him closer with a clawed hand, and he did, so obedient. His gaze fell to her neck, so vulnerable, a necklace of yellow pearls resting on her neck, a color Stan couldnt remember seeing before.

She smiled. “Heya, Stanley,” And his eyes widened at the name, snapping him out of his reverie like a bucket of ice-cold water. “Whaddya say to helping me open this portal a’ mine?” She patted the metal table with a loud clang, and it was only than that Stan got a clear look at her teeth. In this dark room, where the lights went dead, her teeth sharpened to points, glinting in some strange way. It was animalistic, and he felt a shiver go down his spine. He shouldn’t be here, with her.

“All you gotta do is shake on it.” And she offered her hand, her clear voice snapping him out of his thoughts, redirecting him like he was a misguided puppy. He sure felt like one when he gave her his hand, letting her move it up and down like it was the right thing to do, lost in the movement.

But he could barely think, his head already so fuzzy and warm and *weak* from the alcohol. All he could remember was the way her fingers curled in his hair, how they would feel curled around him. How sweet her lips tasted, even with the bitterness of her lipstick. How easily she fit in his arms, how her back curled so easily, how her legs stretched out so freely.

In the forest of Gravity Falls, the pine trees seemed to speak to you.

Under the pure white light of the moon, the only illumination within the dark, the branches of the trees seemed to come to life, still and numerous. The dark green shoots upon them hardly moved, weighed down by pounds of snow, trailing themselves over whoever walked through them. The bark was irregular and textured, rising out in odd bumps and ridges, each unique in its own way, like human skin. You'd never find the exact same kind.

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And after a few minutes, she came across a pond surrounded by white snow, small in size, with almost a fairytale-like quality to it.

Shaking her hand damned him to eternity, just like it damned his twin brother. But he didn't know that. Humans rarely ever did.

A lamb led to slaughter.

– Spot

Love and Affection

And Billie woke up one day, captured within a bone-crushing hug. That was one of the annoying parts of being human. As *delicious* as bones were in other people, having them in herself wasn't as enjoyable. She couldn't really get at them efficiently, and they didn't do it for her when they weren't with other people.

Another thing she hated was the ability to feel heat. The feeling of sweat sticking to her skin made her go crazy in a bad way, and she couldn't escape it either. Things in the Nightmare Realm tended to stay at an even temperature, with not much change. So she loved the freezing cold on Earth, when she could feel her limbs start to go numb. And when it was really cold, it felt like needles pressing on her skin. Though that was when Stanley started to cover her in blankets and coats, pressing her into his warmth.

Which was exactly the issue right now.

Stanley worked as hard as he could most nights, and on those nights he decided to collapse, he dragged Bill to bed with him, curling around her and trapping her within his warmth. She would beat him back a hundred times, but he'd always end up around her eventually. At some point, she just gave up, sighing all-sufferingly. This time, however, he pressed his nose into her neck, breathing on her in a way that made her itch, and she decided she was done entertaining her pet today.

"Off, off!" She ordered him, kicking out a leg and slamming it into his knee, right where he complained it ached.

He groaned loudly and released her, turning over to the other side as he tugged the blanket over himself, hunkering down in the sheets. Finally able to take a full breath, she sighed pleasantly. There was, however, a slick sheen over her back, and she rubbed herself on the sheets, wiping it off and stretching out pleasantly. Now, she looked at the clock. Time had no concept for her, but it did for the portal, which meant she had to keep Stan on a tight leash. She wasn't going to repeat the same mistakes she made for Ford.

Already 7? When had they slept in? She normally dragged him out at 5, and Stan did eventually get out, under threat of physical harm, when she sent him to the basement. She wrapped the shirt she had stolen from him around herself like a makeshift robe and tugged at his arm. When he didn't budge, she grabbed at his arm, jostling his whole body.

He groaned underneath her, shaking her off and throwing the blankets over his head. "Leave me 'lone."

Immediately, she was filled with anger. *Nobody* talked back to her, not even Fez. She grabbed the sheets where they were slack and pulled them out of his grasp, exposing him to the bright light of the sun, reflecting off the snow into the room. He hissed and covered his eyes, curling his legs up in a fetal position. "What did-" She began, pausing when she grabbed his thigh, realizing the sheer heat coming from him. He already ran hot most days, but this was something new. It felt... unnatural, as if it would burn her skin if she kept touching.

She clambered her way up to the head of the bed, taking the tips of her fingers and pressing them against his forehead. Stan sighed in relief, likely at the cold feeling of them, and she paused, waiting. Sixer had told her that humans sometimes took temperature estimates this way, when they didn't have a thermometer readily available. And her hand was telling her he was way too hot. “I think you’re sick.” She said a bit dumbly, taking her hand away.

“Ya think,” Stan croaked, blindly fumbling for her hand as he pulled her back, resting her fingers along his forehead. She scoffed, but allowed him to hold it there as she thought about what to do. But Stan interrupted her. “Haven’t you ever gotten sick before? You sound shocked.”

“*I* don't get sick, unlike some of the lesser creatures I know.” She sneered, snatching her hand away from his complaining. She pulled herself over and out of bed before he could snatch her back, walking over to tug at the blinds, banishing the sun she had noticed he was squinting against. Then she walked out of the room and to the kitchen. Well, looks like she wasn’t going to get breakfast today. But she’d throw him a bone, just for today.

She went to the kitchen and opened the freezer, which Stan had just paid the bills for and thrown out the expired food from. So it was practically empty, except for some chicken nuggets and a full tray of ice. She noticed that he liked her hands, which stayed a perpetually cold, and decided that he probably wanted more of that. She carried it to the counter, but no matter how hard she twisted, she couldn't get them out.

So she turned it upside down and slammed it across the counter, scooping the extra ice cubes back in. She grabbed a Ziploc bag from the drawer that was on the floor and scooped it in, sealing it shut.

She headed back to the room, slamming the door open, which Stan barely reacted too, and silently put the ice bag to his neck. He sighed into the sensation, eyes lolling open for a few seconds before they shut again. “Idiot.” Bill scolded lightly, a whisper that he knew the human wouldn't catch. “I told you that you needed the jacket more than me.” The other day, Bill had insisted on heading out in the snow, unbothered by the cold, much less at the risk of getting sick. Stan had followed after her, and given her his coat, despite her warnings. And now look at him, curled up in his blankets like an oversized bug, shivering against the blankets.

Oh yes, the shivering. One time, he had entered Fordsy’s mindscape when he was sick, and he had been shivering too. He projected the image of blankets, and although it did nothing for his physical body, he claimed it helped relax his mind, the image of them a comfort for him. And honestly, when she was looking at both of them now, she could see their similarities. Both had that twisted look in their sleep, where it looked like their stress never ended. Most humans had this relaxed look in their sleep, where they faded away. Not them. Their brown hair, although at different lengths, still tumbled over their eyes in an untamed mess. Their faces looked naked without their glasses, as if they were a part of it.

So off Bill went, opening the closet in the bathroom with the linens.

Honestly! She hadn't even the time to get ready herself, and she was bothering Lee. Don't say she wasn't charitable! She grabbed a few aimlessly and tossed them over Stanley's body, once she ensured they were unfolded. He was still shivering, but it'd take a bit for the blankets to warm up, she reasoned. "If you're hungry, I'm not cooking." She replied flatly, crossing her arms over her chest. "That's your job."

Stan opened his mouth to say something, and immediately began coughing, soon turning into a fit. His coughs sounded wet, and they rumbled deep within his chest, wracking his body in shakes as he gasped for a breath, rubbing his chest as if that would ease the ache. Bill rubbed at it too, a bit awkwardly, a bit lost as to what she was to do. "Water," Stan said simply, eyes closing into that half asleep state he was in when she first walked it.

She sighed, already annoyed at how he thought he could order her around, and walked to the kitchen, reaching into the cupboard and pulling out a plastic glass of water. She didn't trust him with a real one, and she wasn't in the mood to clean up glass if he dropped it, which she would inevitably have to clean up, lest he step on it and bitch and whine about the resounding cuts on his feet. So she filled it up with water and the ice tray she left on the counter and grabbed a few slices of bread, not bothering to shut it as she walked back to the room. She pressed the glass to his lips, and the conman stirred slightly, reaching a hand through the sheets to grab at it. His hands trembled where he held it, and it spilled over the top. Bill steadied his hands with her own as he brought it to his lips, sipping at it gratefully.

“Sorry, doll. Looks like those long nights in the basement finally took their toll. Don't worry, though,” He added, as if she was, “I'll be back out soon enough.”

Bill took the glass away at the words, much to his displeasure, and simply held up the slice of bread to his mouth. “Whatever. Just stay in bed today, and *only* for today. Don't think you can just sleep in whenever you want. ”

“Yes, ma’am,” He replied, a smile quirking at his lips that she wanted to claw at when he nipped at the bread, tearing off a chunk. “But I swear I’m fine. Ya know how humans are. We get sick and we get better. I just need to work on the portal.” He made to get up, bunching up the blankets around him as he sat up. “I’ll even make you breakfast.”

But prying hands clutched at his hair and pulled painfully. He groaned at the feeling, hands instinctively grabbing at them to relieve it when they pulled him down and to the sheets, pressing his head against his own heated pillow. When they let go, he rubbed at his roots, eyes already watering in his vulnerable state. He glared at Bill silently.

“When I say go work, you work. When I say jump, you say how high. And when I say stay in bed, you stay in bed. Don't make me repeat myself, Fez!” She barked, her eyes turning even colder somehow, fury making them thin to slits. “The last thing I need is your feeble human body giving out on me cuz you tried to play bigshot.”

“I’m not going to die just cause I worked when I was sick one time.” He protested, though he didn't try to get up, not willing to risk her painful hands on him.

“Yeah? How long do you think you’re gonna live? Cause I know, and *I'm not telling!*”

He sighed at her words, giving up the fight. He thought he was a stubborn guy, but she was genuinely unmatched. Billie insisted on having everything go her way, and when it didn’t, she threw a fit. There was no point in fighting her if she was just going to end up screaming at him. Plus, he was already pretty tired to begin with, sleep pulling at his eyes, making him feel as if there was a hole in his chest. His eyes watered at her words. “Can I at least turn my pillow over?”

“You can.” She said, and he reached behind him and flipped it to the cool side. “But if you try to go to the basement for the rest of today, I’ll rip the rest of your hairline out, and then nobody’s gonna want you. It's already shot as it is, don't wanna make it worse!”

He gave a weak chuckle despite her words, but it caught in his throat when he saw her leaving for the door. “Where are you going?”

“To watch TV, duh.” She rolled her eyes, leaning on the doorframe. “What, didja think I was gonna sit here and watch ya be sick? Pretty boring, if you ask me.”

The words caught in his throat, and Stan had to swallow around them, the ache in his throat worsening at the sensation.

There was a pit in his stomach at the thoughts, and he found himself clenching the numerous layers on him, pulling them up to his chin as if he were scared of the dark. The walls around him felt like they were closing in on him, and the thought of being alone in this room, in this dark and lonely house that wasn't his, brought him a terrible sense of dread. Billie, as cruel as she could be, brought a kind of sun with her. Granted, it was scorching and a burning white, but it was still the sun nonetheless.

And it was also kind of embarrassing, but he felt like he was a little kid once again, begging for his mom to comfort him when he was sick. He always got weirdly mushy and overemotional when he didn't feel good. "Could you come back to bed?" He asked, in a whispering voice, and he felt a rush of heat all over him, humiliated at his own request. But Billie turned around, casting him a cursory look, and he felt even worse, as if she was scrutinizing him. Ugh, she was probably judging him.

But to his shock, Billie sighed, lifted herself off the doorframe, and climbed into the bed, a bit of an effort for her due to the high bed frame. She pushed at him, and he scooted to the side, making plenty of room for her to settle herself in. Immediately, he was all over her, pulling her into his orbit once again, trapping her in his sweat-slick, overheating body heat.

"Hey!" She started, and when he pulled back, she started again. "Don't press yourself against me like some untrained dog. I'm in bed out of my own free will." She insisted, as though she hadn't been persuaded by his pathetic brown eyes and red flush over his face. "Don't make me regret it."

He nodded, though she was sure the words went in one ear and out the next, and reached down to grab at her left hand, pulling it up to their heads and placing it by the pillow. He interlaced her fingers and pressed them to his forehead, easing the heat while getting the contact that he craved. Offhandedly, she realized that the bag of ice was half melted, and she would have to go get some more later.

The portal could wait for another day. It wasn't like it was going anywhere.

– Spot

Catch Me If You Can

The best bets are the biggest gambles. The risks that can cost you everything can also let you take it all and more. Anyone can be a winner, but just a few will emerge as the victor in the game called Life.

Only the fool who chases after the brief thrill, the tantalizing possibility, the narrowly slim chance that they will one day be blessed with a fortune, can truly be called a gambler.

Stan knows this better than the average Joe. He'll dare you to find anyone else who could!

Well, maybe not here. Not in this bizarro dimension whose entire foundation is built upon wagers and lottery draws. Horse races determine the weekly weather forecast. Grocery stores are mini-auction halls where the prized produce goes to the highest bidder. Hell, even your marriage partner is a blind pick in the dark, literally! He just passed by a decorated courtyard where a blind-folded bride, wedding band pinched in hand, walked down the aisle to three grooms, where only one would be the lucky recipient of the nuptial blessing.

He should have snatched the gold jewelry while she wasn't looking and gone on his way. It would have been easier than taking candy from a baby.

Adapting to these dicey rules was easy for a guy like him who, before he ~~was pushed~~ had fallen into that blindingly bright vortex, had to stake his life everyday in order to get by. His dimension was an uncaring world that never favored him. But here?

Here, he has found himself in a galaxy where he can smoothly cruise by with a smart combination of slight hand gestures and poker faces.

He just hopes that he won't be chased out of here as well, especially on such a fortuitous day.

If luck be a lady tonight, and in Lottacron Nine she is, then Stanley Pines is gonna take her to bed.

~

Senip Yelnats swaggers with all the confidence he shouldn't have to the entrance of the most luxurious hotel-casino complex in the dimension's capital: Fortuna's Favor. His last stint in the M Dimension when he flipped a couple of inhabitants upside-down to form a "W" was considered the most serious offense one could commit, and he's been on the Dimensional Authority's blacklist ever since. And don't even get him STARTED on the people from the Symbol Dimension. As far as he is concerned, and he isn't, all those @$$&@!!s had it coming!

Sneaking around the ridiculously huge spaceship that is home to the Central Governing Authority of the Gambling Dimension is NOT easier said than done, but for a guy like Stan, who had broken into twenty-two of the United States' State Lottery HQs in his "Before Era" (B.E. as he helpfully denotes it), he's got it under control. No fancy-schmancy sci-fi laser beam-activated alarms that singed his hair and nearly lit his pants on fire were gonna keep him out of the galaxy's version of Sin City: Cynn City!

It's, uh, not as original of a name as he was expecting. The multiverse is more lame than his brother's nerdy shows led him to believe. You tend to see some repeats after a while.

Stan never thought he'd find a place that could hold a candle to Vegas, but this joint just extinguished its flame! Secluded under a high dome, surrounded by stars and planets visible through the transparent glass as they twinkle from galaxies far, far away, the towering buildings form splendid plazas that cater to your carnal needs. They have it all in one, convenient spot: drinking, dining, partying, and, of course, gambling. The ultimate paradise and the perfect trap for the hungry who can't seem to satisfy themselves. Stan's used to never feeling full.

Adorned in an extra set of arms complete with a hand-stitched pair of sleeves taped to his torso, he doesn't blend seamlessly into the four-limbed crowd, but he doesn't obtrusively stand out. The bouncers stationed at each side of the gilded doors don't give him any trouble. Their dot-like eyes hover over his form, a familiar prickling sensation raising the hairs on the back of his neck, before they slide over to the next attendee.

He continues to stride through unhurriedly, pockets lined with not enough cash and neck lined with a gold chain (which is one-hundred percent real, whaddya take him for?!) that gleams underneath the ornate chandeliers. Their dim lights allow the neon glow of the slots' eye-catching signs to snag your attention, trying to reel you in for a round and then some.

If he had the time and the money, Stan would have given a couple of machines a spin just to try his hand at it, but he's running low on both at the moment. You can never get back time, unless you want the Time Police run by that oversized toddler to hunt you down, but you CAN make a fortune if you're quick enough.

There's one destination he has in mind, and no matter what world he's been spat out into, they all have this. All the desperate drifters who get lost on the road of life end up here at some point, each of them searching for something they won't find, but this is a good enough distraction.

Stan ignores the trilling beeps and rings that resound about the hall, dinging at alluring frequencies that urge him to pivot around. Instead, he determinedly follows the glossy tiled path that winds through the carpeted sections. Towards the back of the room, he rounds the corner to stand in front of a more discreet, but no less grand, pair of double doors. The face of a beautiful woman, the divine goddess of chance herself, greets him from where she is carved into the wooden panels. He pushes them open with both hands, and the sight he beholds on the other side is a familiar one.

The poker table.

What does it say about this classic game that it's a constant in whichever reality you visit? In a bar you have to dive underwater to enter, a digital space where you have to electronically upload your neural network to connect to a playroom, and even in Globnar competitions: it's everywhere!

That just goes to show that it's the perfect timeless, dimensionless pastime. One of Stan's favorites, actually.

Better yet, he's *good* at it. You just have to be skilled at one thing and one thing only: bluffing. If there's one lesson his Pa taught him as he lectured to Stan in the confines of the dusty pawn shop that he still follows to this day, it's that a pair of balls beats everything.

The tables are jam-packed tonight which isn't surprising. Everyone's flooded the venue for the special occasion that rolls around once every year: the Cynn City Lottery. Tonight, the lucky winner of the draw will be crowned the upcoming year's host for the planet-hopping capital ship. From what Stan can tell, it's a holiday as celebrated as New Year's Eve back on his Earth. Gaudy streamers keep spooking him with randomly-timed colorful blasts and obnoxious horns trumpeting into his failing ears.

He avoids the hustle and bustle as best as he can without coming off as a loner. Everyone notices a loner. If he's gonna grab people's attention tonight, it'll be by clearing out everyone's wallets at the table.

He peruses his options carefully, critically eying the menagerie of suckers who won't know what hit 'em once Stanley Pi–he means *Senip Yelnats*–buys in the next round. When he scopes out a group he doesn't think will give him too much trouble, their bets uncalculated and strategies basic, his focus then shifts over to the dealer standing behind the table.

All of the casino employees are robots.

They are standard-issued with a few tweaks made to the rigid design depending on their assigned roles. Bartenders come equipped with an internal refrigerator and ice machine. Floor supervisors scan the rooms with security cameras built into their heads. The dealer bots have an extra pair of hands to help facilitate quick shuffles and counting out cards without delay.

This kind of technology would blow the minds of the people in Stan's home dimension, but it's lost a bit of its surreal allure on him the more he sees out here beyond the portal. He isn't the same man who had to frantically swim through the frothing dark sea of empty space, just barely making it out of the whirlpool of psychedelic swirls and blinding flashes of lightning alive. He couldn't afford to be if he wanted to survive.

He wonders what pushes him forward. Maybe it's the instinct he was born with, that all living creatures are born with, that innately urges him on. Maybe it's the always-present weight he keeps close to him that he continues to carry. Maybe it's the pounding in his chest that hasn't stopped hurting since he was seventeen years old that doesn't want to give up just yet.

Either way, Stanley's still here. Might as well make something of it.

He moseys over to the table once the round ends, a spot opening up as one of the players cashes out, with all the casualness of an uninterested bystander. He glances about as if this isn't what he's been plotting all night. "Deal me in, wouldja?"

He slams down a handful of chips he had swiped from one of the counters he had passed by and pushes it towards the center. The pool chips are arranged in uneven stacks on top of each other, the leaning towers wobbling a bit as his addition nearly topples them over.

The android's blank, bulb-like eyes flicker on-and-off before they beam a fluorescent yellow, the ugly color spearing itself into his own eyeballs, as it responds.

"DON'T MIND IF YOU DO! HOP ON IN, SLIC– I MEAN, *VALUED PATRON*."

The blaring response is a distorted shriek as it plays out of the audio system, static crackling in and out like someone is crumpling a piece of paper into a distant microphone. It's a stark contrast to the smooth, clear, and respectful tones all the other mechanical workers speak with.

Stan smiles broadly to the rest of the group. The corners of his mouth are tugged up to his cheekbones to show off his entire dental display, even the missing molars. "Nice to meet cha!" He plucks a martini glass off of a server's plate as it circles around the room and extends it high in a toast, nearly spilling half of it onto his neighbor's python-braided hair that hisses at him threateningly. "Here's to goin' all in tonight! I have a feeling one of us is gonna hit it big!" His lower "arms" jerkily follow the gesture.

The responding cheers fade into a background buzz as he glances back over his shoulder to the dealer.

A standard Lottacronian deck is being rapidly shuffled from hand to hand in a blur, deft fingers cutting and rejoining the cards together. The higher pair of hands is making minor adjustments to its body: smoothing out any wrinkles of the casino-issued vest, fiddling with the black bowtie that rests underneath the sharp chin, and slicking back the artificial pompadour that has a few strands sticking out to put on a...top hat?

Yup, that's a top hat. The most pompous accessory the biggest, most self-absorbed jerks in existence love to wear, apparently. Stan has met the worst of the worst first-hand, many times in fact, and is convinced that this is a multi-universal truth.

Geez, can a guy ever catch a break? Not even on a holiday?

Well, his night's not ruined yet. In fact, this could even be fun if the cards fall right. Let's see if his winning-streak holds before it even begins.

Stan settles against the counter and watches closely as the first two cards of the round are dealt face-down to each player, leaning a bit towards the center. There's a manic energy to the movements, fingers twitching jerkily each time they slide a card out of the deck, as if the wires are shorting out. The polite, robotic smile that should be programmed onto that flat face is as wide as Stan's and even more phony.

With one functional hand, Stan checks the hole cards while the other taps lightly against the underside of the table. After a bit, when no one else notices the pattering, a pattern emerges from it.

You're really one hell of a stalker. I admire the dedication, but don't you have anything better to do?

The dealing hand convulses with an electric spasm before the first card up lands in front of Stan. It's the same suit as both his down cards: hearts. Or a symbol that resembles a heart. They all slightly diverge from each other from dimension to dimension, similar enough to be recognizable yet foreign enough to remind him he's still *very* far from home.

The fourth arm, the one closest to Stan, suddenly disappears underneath the counter, and he can barely make out the timing.

WHAT? CAN'T A TRIANGLE HAVE A FUN SIDE GIG FOR NO APPARENT REASON? MAYBE I NEED SOME EXTRA POCKET CHANGE. YOU THINK TOO HIGHLY OF YOURSELF.

Even when there's no verbal exchange, he still sounds so damn *loud*. Stan's ears inexplicably ache.

If this is your idea of fun, I'd hate to see what kind of parties you throw. They must be a real snooze-fest.

The disguised human matches the raise and adds half a stack to the center. *Bet that's why you can't keep your eye off of me. I'm the most entertainment you've had in a long time, amiright?*

The internal gears in the elbows screech to a grinding halt as they bend, grating on everyone's ears as they wince back. They quickly resume their silent rotations, and the movements smooth out.

YOU? ENTERTAINING? HAHAHAHAHA! THAT'S RICH COMING FROM A BROKE MAN!

Stan doesn't react to the jeering laughter that's jabbed into the soft wood harder than necessary, as if to emphasize the ridicule.

THE ONLY ENTERTAINMENT YOU'LL BRING ME IS WHEN I SWAP THE CARTILAGE AND BONES IN YOUR BODY AND KEEP YOU AS A BOBBLE HEAD FIGURE ON MY WORK DESK.

The fourth card is another "heart". Better yet, it's looking like he's a card away from forming a flush. It's a strong hand, strong enough for him to win if there's no miraculously better play.

...suspicious.

You sure put a lotta thought into that little fantasy roleplay. Can't get me off your mind, can you? It'd almost be cute if you weren't, y'know, you.

A metallic foot almost slams down on his toes, but he saves them in the knick of time.

Ah, come on! Don't act like you're not into the chase. Stan subtly readjusts the fake arms from where they're sliding down his torso before anyone notices that the limbs are reused newspaper mache. *You'd miss this if it ends. Come on, admit it, you'd miss it, Bill.*

Bill Cipher scoffs even though there's no way to express his silent ire through morse code, but Stan's been picking--

--up on the triangle's tells after the one too-many encounters they've shared across the multiverse. His piloted body deals out the next card to the Lottacronian with the highest card visible. Shrewd brown eyes pick up on how they deal from the bottom of the deck.

YOU GOT IT TWISTED AND THEN TWISTED IT EVEN MORE, DUMBO. YOU JUST HAPPEN TO BE IN POSSESSION OF SOMETHING I WANT, AND YOU'VE MADE IT VERY DIFFICULT TO CONTACT YOU DIRECTLY NOWADAYS TO INQUIRE ABOUT IT.

A thoughtful pause follows that. *DID YOU BLOCK MY NUMBER OR SOMETHING?*

The showy beam befitting a showman shifts into a joyful, genuine shit-eating grin, uplifting his demeanor. *Must suck that you can't spam me with nightmare calls anymore, right? I put up an Anti-Cipher defense taught to me by a pro. Apparently, I have the creative imagination to keep up with you.*

The flat teeth in the dealing golem's expression grind against each other despite the smile staying locked into place. *OH, IS THAT SO? I KNEW YOU PICKED UP A NASTY VIRUS FROM DIMENSION 52. YOUR MIND HAS BEEN INFECTED WITH A SPELL CASTED BY A SEVEN-EYED WITCH.*

Better than being tormented by a one-eyed monster.

YOU SAY THAT NOW, BUT JUST YOU WAIT! YOU'RE MISSING OUT ON ALL THE AMAZING DEALS WE COULDA MADE TOGETHER, AND YOU'LL REGRET IT SOONER OR LATER, STAN.

Fat chance, buck-o.

Bill doesn't reply as the round ends, and Stan soundly beats his opponents with a straight flush. He gleefully slides all the stacks towards him, the urge to go in even bigger sweeping over him as they change seats and place the blinds.

The current is swift, and he knows full well he could be dragged under, but he's always been one to test the tides. The ocean was once his home, and he's a strong swimmer.

The winner unobtrusively knocks another message under the table as the Bill-er (Bill + dealer, get it? Eh, that needs to be workshopped) burns the first card of the shuffled deck and hands out the cards in a clockwise circle. Once again, all of Stan's deals come from the bottom of the deck.

You've been rigging my hand.

The first up cards come around, and Stan's been handed an "ace". The rest of the crowd murmurs appreciatively at his high card.

DON'T TELL ME IT'S TAKEN YOU THIS LONG TO FIGURE THAT OUT, OR I'D ALMOST BE DISAPPOINTED.

I know I don't need to tell you that this is cheating, right?

REALLY?!? GOLLY GEE, I HAD NO CLUE!!!

And it's making me richer.

GUESS THAT'S HOW IT LOOKS, DOESN'T IT? LET'S SEE IF YOU CAN HOLD ONTO IT.

Ah, so that's how it is.

Despite indulging in so many vices, Lottacron Nine strictly forbids cheating of any kind when gambling. Apparently, they once exiled some guy from the dimension just for counting cards of all offenses! Stan had been hoping to get away with a handful of little tricks to increase his odds, but what Bill's doing is even worse. By dragging Stan into being an unwilling, seemingly-complicit partner in this scheme, he'll for sure be found guilty if caught. As punishment, he'd be ejected from the galaxy and likely crash land in the boiling, bubbling stream of impossibilities that surrounds the stable dimensions: the Nightmare Realm. Exactly where Bill wants him.

Wow, that's actually pretty clever. Didn't know you had it in you.

WHA–EXCUSE YOU! I HAVE PLENTY OF EVERYTHING IN ME! I TRICKED YOUR BRAINIAC BROTHER, DIDN'T I?!

Yeah, yeah he did. That's the reason Stan's here in the first place.

Sixer, for all his smarts, realized too little too late that a good deal is always too good to be true. Stan's paying the price for it now, and he probably always will be.

The next couple of rounds all end in Stan's favor, steadily draining the other patrons of their funds as they become a dragon's hoard of goodies.

The voracious, near starving, pit in his stomach is rumbling for more at the sight, so he keeps it going. Eyes upon eyes watch him as a crowd of spectators form, and it's only a matter of time before floor security notices the disturbance. Until then, he's taking as much as he can.

Bill at least seems to understand where he's coming from.

YOU HUMANS ARE REALLY GREEDY, AREN'T CHA? MAKES SENSE WHY IT'S ONE OF THE SEVEN BEAUTIES OF MORTAL FAILINGS. BUT ARE YOU REALLY GONNA RISK GETTING CAUGHT FOR IT? THERE'S A FINE LINE BETWEEN CONFIDENCE AND STUPIDITY, AND YOU'RE ALREADY CROSSED IT SEVERAL TIMES OVER, FEZ.

Never got why you call me that, Stan remarks offhandedly as he mentally counts the chips. If he can, he'd like to squeeze in one more round. *At least use nicknames that make sense.*

IN ANOTHER LIFE, IT DOES. YOU MESSED THIS ONE UP TOO MUCH FOR IT TO EVER FIT YOU PROPERLY.

He wonders if Bill really *can* see that timeline and what he does in it. Is it better than this, or somehow terribly worse? Knowing himself, they probably both have it rough.

A bunch of floor security droids begin to circle their table, cameras activated and warning lights blinking rapidly. Damn, there goes the opportunity to cash out. Now it's time to make his daring escape!

“OH NO, LOOK! Your shoes are untied!” Stan dramatically points down to the feet of a woman wearing high heels, no laces in sight.

Distracted by the random outburst, no one stops him as he roughly shoulder checks his neighbor into the closest security personnel. He then hightails out of there after scooping as many of his earnings as possible into an empty bucket. His paper mache arms fly off his body at the breakneck speed, and a nearby Lottacronian man faints in terror as the detached limbs whack him upside the head.

His dress shoes squeak in distress as he whirls along the marble flooring, nearly crashing into a slot machine as he dashes erratically through the complex. He hears what sounds like harsh metal clanging behind him, and quickly throws a look back to see that Bill’s puppet is doggedly keeping up with him.

“STANLEY PINES,” the tinny voice echoes after him. “GIVE ME THE JOURNAL, OR I’LL RIP ALL YOUR CLOTHING OFF TO GET IT IF I HAVE TO!”

“Woah there, pal! At least buy me a drink first,” Stan quips back, breathless giggles falling out in between pants as Bill’s voice box booms out a gargle of radio interference. He clutches the first journal, as marked by the number etched into the gold symbol representing his twin’s hand, where it's safely tucked into his waistband.

They dart through to the main atrium where hotel guests are checking in.

The forces pursuing them triple in number, forming a sort of pincer formation to cut them off before they can get to the exit. Above them, blasting over the city and exploding in streaks of blazing rainbow, are fireworks as the honored lottery drawing dawns upon the final hour of the holiday.

All the while, Bill doesn't stop his rambling. He always comes back to harp on the same talking points that Stan will never hear him out on. The material's gotten stale quick.

"JUST MAKE A DEAL WITH ME, STANLEY! ONCE YOU DO, IT'LL FINALLY BE OVER! THE LYING. THE RUNNING AWAY. THE HIDING. HASN'T CONTINUING THIS CONSTANT CYCLE OF BEING A FUMBLING LOSER GOTTEN EXHAUSTING YET?"

"Go bring it up with my lawyer!"

"I REFUSE TO CONDUCT BUSINESS WITH AN EXWHYLIAN NAMED PYRAMID STEVE!!!"

"Then tough luck!"

Stan throws himself through one of the stained-glass windows that depicts some revered historical event, who cares really, and lands in the courtyard. A huge, flowing fountain sits at its epicenter, stone sculptures of previous dimensional leaders poised as water flows off their hands into the basin below. Another earth-quaking boom splits open the sky. What he's searching for isn't too far from here, but will he make it in time?

“I’LL RETURN YOU BACK HOME SAFE AND SOUND TO YOUR BROTHER, AND I PERSONALLY GUARANTEE THIS WILL ALL BE LIKE A BAD DREAM YOU WON’T QUITE REMEMBER.”

He twists around to face Bill, who instantly grips him with all four arms and yanks him forward. The yellow light that shines onto his face is brighter than the sun, but as Stan manages to barely make eye contact with it, he feels as if he’s being tugged into the all-consuming depths of a black hole.

“I KNOW YOU’RE THE IDIOT HALF OF THE STAN SET, BUT THIS IS A NO-BRAINER. YOU’RE SURROUNDED. YOU GOT NOWHERE TO GO. YOU’RE *ALONE*. DON’T WANNA TAKE MY DEAL? I’LL TAKE *YOU* INSTEAD AND DANGLE YOU OVER SIXER’S INFLATED HEAD UNTIL HE FINALLY OPENS THE PORTAL. YOU WILL BE *MINE*.”

It’s times like these that the true force of Bill’s power impresses itself onto him, as if someone’s crushing and grinding him into the unforgiving ground under their heel.

Bill Cipher is *dangerous*. Stan will never forget their first meeting, how the flat shape had towered over him like an all-powerful king with a beastly army on either side awaiting orders. The lost human was sure he had finally ended up in Hell and that he’d be thrown into its fires to cleanse his soul of all the rotten bits. There’d be nothing of him left if that happened.

But that didn’t happen.

Stanley Pines somehow managed to hide in an asteroid field, swim through the intergalactic foam as fast as humanly possible, and dive into the first wormhole he could find. He actually prayed to whatever deity was out there for help, and *someone* out there must have been listening for once because he made it out alive. And again, and again, and again.

After all this time, and who knows how much of it has really passed, Bill has yet to finally fulfill all the nasty, violent, and horrifying threats he'd fill Stan's head with whenever the dream demon managed to invade his Mindscape. The guy's been around for too many eons, but from what Stan can tell, has never successfully built a portal to Earth.

In the end, Bill Cipher is a con man. A scam artist. A liar. And, most importantly, a loser. Just like Stanley.

When put like that, what's there to fear?

"Sure; I'm all yours, Bill," Stan agrees, closing the distance.

The metal body sparks brightly from its exposed circuits as he slides his hands down the torso and encircles them around the back. It's a tight, intimate, and inescapable embrace.

As he leans down to just barely brush his lips against the surface of Bill's face, a puff of steam escapes out of the vents along the neck and pushes back the bangs on his forehead.

The possessed automaton is rapidly overheating, and to the touch hot enough to blister skin. The sound of the internal fans whirring to life has him smiling as he looks his pursuer directly in the eye, even with the innumerable amount of dimensions that separate them.

“If you can catch me.”

In a move he learned a lifetime ago in the dusty gym at Glass Shard Beach High School, Stan lifts and flips the robot in one fluid motion into the pool of water next to them. The dimension celebrates with a final, grand round of sparkling fireworks.

“AND HAPPY LOTTO DAY!”

He’s already running away when the splash of water follows, a few droplets hitting the back of his neck as he sprints to the wormhole he had scoped out earlier. The crackling hiss before a loud *BOOM* bursts out has him laughing all over again.

When he jumps into the swirling portal into the unknown, he has this one, final thought before he’s squeezed through time and space:

This is kinda fun.

~

“I’M COUNTING THAT AS A DEAL, STANLEY PINES,” Bill bellows from his throne of optical illusions. The bizarre images shatter like a cracked mirror as they splinter apart from each other.

Even if the object of his rage cannot hear him, he continues to yell straight from a heart he insists he doesn't possess. "NO HANDSHAKE REQUIRED."

The Henchmaniacs exchange uneasy glances as their boss throws a temper tantrum freely expresses his feelings in a healthy manner. Better out than in, right?

"I WANT ALL EYES ON HIM. I WANT ALL OF OUR ALLIES TO MAKE HIM THEIR NUMBER ONE PRIORITY. I WANT TO FIND HIM, CAPTURE HIM, AND–*AND*–" Stan's biting, taunting, yet mesmerizing smile pops up inside his mind again.

Bill screeches unintelligibly from an overwhelming sensation he can't—*won't*—name, bright red and feeling as if there's an inferno setting alight and chewing away at his insides. *Where is this coming from?!*

"Wha–what about Ford Pines, sir?" Keyhole manages to ask meekly, trembling once that big, irritated pupil focuses on him. "I j–just thought that he was the important one. To fix the portal..." He trails off as the narrowed glare nearly smites him with its intensity.

"STANFORD? PLEASE! I KNOW EXACTLY WHERE HE IS AND HOW TO GET HIM TO BEND. IT'S HIS DUMB DUPLICATE THAT'S THE KEY TO EVERYTHING."

Yes, Bill realizes as he sits back down. He summons his all-seeing orb to peer through the universe's fog and scry to exactly who he wants to see. The mist wavers, but after a moment, the rugged drifter's face is brought into focus.

He brings the apparition right up to his eye and burns it onto his mind like a brand.

Stanley Pines is everything, and doesn't Bill deserve to have everything? That means he *must* make that man *his*.

– walkingwindbreakr215

Providence is Just a Handshake Away

Somewhere, in one of the dime of a dozen suburban neighborhoods that dot the Midwest, a sleek, nondescript car with a pitch-black paint job and tinted windows rolls to a stop across from a small public park. A steady stream of people spills through the entrance, curiously talking to each other as they point ahead at whatever spectacle is taking place inside. The driver's side door cracks open, and a very suspicious-looking man very conspicuously steps out.

A long, not particularly well-fitting, trench coat trails after him, like a child playing dress-up in suits far too big and ill-suited for their undeveloped frames. It falls stiffly around the knees as he ties off the fastening around his waist, taking the time to survey the scenery through darkened shades. It's an ordinary crowd in an ordinary park in an ordinary town, but what is about to take place will be anything but extra ordinary. Of that, he has been assigned here to observe and report on, and he will do so with the utmost diligence.

He adjusts the brim of his fedora to slant mysteriously over his forehead and slightly into his field of vision as he attempts to merge and blend into the crowd. Ignorant to the annoyed looks thrown his way as he clips people's sides and pushes his way through, he whips out a notepad from his coat's breastpocket and begins jotting something onto the page while simultaneously covering the notes from potential onlookers, clutching it uncomfortably close to his chest.

12:57 - T-minus three minutes. Attendees all appear to be local denizens. No sighting of the target yet.

He glances at the thick wad of papers taped to the inside cover, folded into a lumpy square on a very peculiar section that caught the attention of the higher-ups. Bold, obnoxiously so, letters practically shout at the readers from the page with a peculiar texture of liquid metal, a rarity rarely seen in print.

Wanna find PROVIDENCE?! Of course you do! Come on down, and we'll give you the directions for a BARGAIN price (Only accepting payment via cash, gold, soul IOUs, your grandma's will, and gift cards to White Castle)!

The carefully cut grass, pristine and at the perfect height, gets trampled as the large mass of people disperse off of the pathway to gather around the main landmark at the center of the municipal park. The stone monument, reaching up to the heavens with four sides merging at the top in a pointed tip, spews out rivers that trickle down its sides into a basin. The slightly murky bottom from years of recycled water is littered with piles of tiny shiny speckles of what were once wishes, winking up at those who curiously peer down below.

The operative bobs his head up and over the sea of bodies, attempting to catch a glimpse at the "star" before the performance begins. His elbows get crushed into his sides at an angle that acutely interferes with his dutiful record keeping, so he temporarily yields his ability to write in favor of his ability to spy.

But there! Propped on a bench against the fountain's low-rising walls are a bunch of mismatched bags of varying states of wear and tear ranging from worn and dilapidated to shiny and new.

A story of burgeoning success is told through the belongings.

A small stall, which was really just a foldable table and clothing racks arranged together, is more stocked with merchandise than a sports stand at a stadium. Hangers upon hangers of T-shirts in a spectrum of colors across the rainbow, caps of all sizes (even infants!), and banners with psychedelic splashes of swirls; the cheap ephemera all display the same, identifiable symbol. The agent briefly makes eye contact with one, and it's as if it was already watching him. He ducks his head out of its view and awkwardly tilts his wrist to continue his notes.

13:00: The tell-tale mark is unmistakable, just as foretold from the files. I believe there is a good chance that this is the real thing, that humanity is once again being spied upon by a higher, purely malevolent being. However, I will withhold any conclusions until the end.

His probing gaze sweeps over the crowd, a bland collection of simpletons just itching for something *exciting* to break up their monotonous routines. All that is missing from this show is its showman.

A flicker of movement flashes in the corner of his vision, and his attention unwittingly chases after it. Seemingly out of nowhere, quicker than a blink of the eye, there is a man posed on the walls of the fountain. As if an invisible set of red stage curtains from which he was concealed behind were just drawn back in one swift instantaneous tug.

The audience flinches back and lets out a unified gasp of surprise, and the undercover investigator barely suppresses the knee-jerk reaction with training the academy had beaten into his muscles. Quickly, he struggles to flick on the tape recorder hidden in the inside pocket of his trench coat.

“Ladies and gentleman, boys and girls, I hope you’re all ready for the sorry excuse you call a life to get a million times better, because I got something that will knock your socks off and finally open your eyes to your destiny!”

A crooked cane whirls around in a blurred circle as cheers echo along the trees surrounding the clearing. “Thank you, thank you. Wow, this is a warm welcome. Really makes a guy feel special.”

Fingers smoothly lift and flip off a boater hat, and the flat disk lands perfectly on the curved top of the cane, twirling a bit. On cue, *ooooo*s and *aaaaa*s get easily pulled out of the onlookers. “I'm sure I don’t need an introduction, but I’m gonna give one anyway for the folks still stuck in the dark!"

A broad smile, bared and whetted, is pointed at the crowd. “The name’s Poplarleaf, Sylvan Poplarleaf, and recently, I’ve been called upon to undertake a grand life mission.”

“Sylvan” begins to amble along the top of the wall, the twin tails of his yellow-and-black pinstripe suit flapping after him, almost as if they are waving hello.

““You see, I’m a well-traveled fellow, and as I hop around the map, I’m beginning to pick up on a pattern that every, single, one of you–” he jabs an accusing finger from person to person, punctuating the words, “–follows.”

“What is it?” The woman at the other end of his finger pipes up.

“Woah there, lady, hold your horses. I’ll tell ya!” Poplarleaf chastises with a waggle the offending digit. “You people have forgotten what it means to dream BIG!”

He stops for a moment to shake his head in exaggerated disappointment. “What’s happened to this country? We used to be the real deal! We mass produced steel on the backs of our hildren. We punched Nazis in Europe so hard we made them go crying home to their mommy! We were stuck on the ground, so we learned how to fly in a steel container, and put a bunch of guys on the big cheese wheel in outer space! But when I look at all of you, living in your neat little rows of identical shoeboxes, getting stuck in traffic to go work in a different shoebox, driving back to the first shoebox, and waking up to do it all over again the next day and the day after that, I see nothing but a bunch of crazy people!”

The spectators murmur at his declaration, taken aback and slightly offended.

“Yeah, that’s what I said: cra–zy!” The salesman pauses, allowing it to sink in as he places his hat back on his head. “But hey, I don’t blame you. I was one of you chumps, too, once upon a time.”

He taps the tip of his cane against the marble, and the sharp sound pierces through the growing din of the restless crowd. “But lucky you, I’m feelin’ generous, so I’ll let you in on a little secret.” He holds a cupped hand around his mouth. “There’s a very big, nasty tasting lie that top dogs force fed to all of us little guys since we were pooping in our diapers, and we got so used to it that we grew up willingly shoveling it in and taking even bigger craps. Any guesses what it is?”

Aside from a few half-aborted nods, awkwardly clueless smiles, and wide eyes, no one responds.

“Well, here it is: if you do the ‘right’ thing and follow what they say, you’ll live a good, successful life. But really? It’s society’s biggest set up. Day in and day out is just the same old soup reheated in the microwave served to you in a new bowl, and you all chow it down like you’ve never had it before.” Poplarleaf looks at the crowd, and the crowd looks back, utterly entranced. “So yeah, you’re crazy. But,” his already wide smile somehow grows even broader, slightly shadowed under the afternoon sun, “if you’re gonna be crazy, at least be the *fun* kind of crazy.”

The hidden spy frowns deeply, hurriedly continuing the transcript on paper, watching as several people around him return the unhinged grin with their own faces.

Sylvan bends forward slightly, encroaching over the people in the first row and forcing them to crane up their necks. “I’ll bet, whether you know it or not, that you wanna try something new. Something exciting. Something *impossible*.

Your dreams seem like fantasies that you can only visit in your sleep and have to leave when you wake up. You keep it locked up in your noggin because you don't know how to let it out."

The actor theatrically splays a hand to his chest, softening his booming voice to a more measured cadence. "I know how that feels. I used to be my own worst enemy because I let my head hold me back," he commiserates. "I was blind to the truth…but then my metaphorical eyes were finally gifted sight by *him*." He raises his cane up and behind him, gesturing around to no one in particular.

Him. It mimics the reverence only the most pious of disciples could truly invoke from their souls, curling with faux wonder off of that silver tongue. And yet, and the undercover cop might be mistaken, there is a slight waver to the speech, a distorted chord of awe. It's the only authentic sound he's heard from this charlatan's mouth so far.

"Providence himself visited me at my lowest. I was down in the dumps, huddled up in a cave in the middle of nowhere, wondering if I should gnaw off my own foot for food. With his all-seeing eye, he pushed back the curtain shrouding the universe and showed me what reality *really* looked like. He told me there was a way I could bring my hopes and dreams to life. All I had to do was shake his hand," Sylvan wiggles all five of his fingers, "and I'd be set."

"So like a genie?" A middle-aged man towards the back calls out goadingly. "Or a fairy godmother? Sounds like a bunch of bogus to me."

Poplarleaf throws his head back as he laughs loudly. “Call him whatever you want, Jack! Say, if *you* had a wish, would you go back in time and beg your wife not to divorce you and take the kids with her? It sure is lonely in that big, empty house, isn’t it?”

Jack rears back in alarm. “How did you know about my–?”

“I told you; I was given the cheatsheet to existence itself!” He turns his attention back to the rest of the audience to continue his spiel. “And now I found my purpose: unveiling the divine truth so that people like you can go out into the world and find your destiny!”

The crowd surges forward, lips babbling with questions about their futures, as if magnetically pulled towards the salesman. There’s a buzzing energy, like a live wire of electrical current, that jumps from person to person, and the agent would be lying if he didn’t feel that tingling charge just waiting to zap him into motion. It’s unlike any other bodily sensation a human being is naturally capable of experiencing. Dangerous, potentially deadly, but that’s why it's so addictively thrilling.

Well, the sheep always want to follow a shepherd.

“Woah, woah, don’t worry, folks! Back it up! You’ll find what you’re searching for,” the chapman assures, pushing away any faces that got into his personal space with the handle of his cane. “As long as you buy one of the mystical items at the stand over there, of course. Helps with, uh, solidifying your mental connection to Bil– I MEAN–*the All-Seeing Eye!* Yeah!--

--The more the better! Kids, feel free to fish out some extra pocket change from the fountain if your parents are too much of a cheapskate to support a worthy cause!"

The investigator victoriously jots down and underlines the final sentence three times, satisfaction welling up inside him.

*1:13: **HE** is behind all of this.*

"So remember: if you fall asleep and dream about a triangle who wants to enter your mind, you should DEFINITELY make a deal with him. After all, and repeat after me folks, *Providence is only a handshake away!*"

The hustler ends his pitch in a peculiar pose: hanging his cane from the crook of his elbow as he connects index to index, thumb to thumb, angled to form a three-sided shape around his left eye while he winks with his right. Something bright flashes from the center, glaring and vulgar, before it goes dark. And when Sylvan Poplarleaf lowers his hands from his face, basking in the adulatory cheers, there, around his eye, is a triangle.

The special agent didn't even notice it until now, much to his shame, since he was more focused on the carny's words rather than his face. At first glance, it's as if a kindergartener had sloppily scribbled on the man's face with a red marker instead of a coloring book. The lines are shaky and imprecise as they outline the socket: up a little past the brow bone, to the high point of the cheek, and to the inside corner of the eye next to the bridge of his prominent nose.

There's an almost faded quality to the slightly raised, angry-looking skin that belongs more to a scar, freshly healing and permanently marring the visage. Such a ragged etching couldn't be replicated with face paint or even a tattoo.

It's too much dedication to be a mere gimmick, and only supports the conclusion this detective has already decided upon.

"As a special bonus, we're having a sale on our perfume! 5% if you're a lady, 6% if you're a hot lady. No, it is not formaldehyde; I repeat, it is NOT formaldehyde. If you start to feel nauseous, develop headaches, or have trouble breathing, there is absolutely NO correlation to the usage of this product. I am not liable for any of your future health problems. AND NO REFUNDS!!!"

The official allows the mob to move past him to swarm the stand, where fistfuls of green paper, gold chains, and other accepted tenders are exchanged for tacky goods that supposedly guarantee their liberation from the ennui shackles of conformity. The salesman greedily stuffs it all into a sack, clearly having anticipated that he would be landing a large score after the show, chatting up customers and shoving more advertisements down their pliable throats.

In the meantime, while everyone is distracted, the agent heads to the more wooded area of the park and tucks himself behind a cluster of birch trees, away from any prying eyes. In this moment of reprieve, he goes over the facts of the case to occupy his mind.

Agent Noe Z. Bodii marched through the Department of Cover-Ups, the most exclusively obscure division of the FBI that even the highest of government officials are unaware of, with a purpose. Briefcase clutched in a white-knuckled fist, he stormed up to the office door at the back, secluded and presumably belonging to someone very important in the sector. On the other side of the frosted window, labeled with the appropriate title, was a dark blur sitting at a desk. He knocked precisely against the wooden frame, hard and splitting through the air. Several coworkers working nearby in their cubicles shot him hostile glances that grazed his back obliviously.

A heavy sign was somehow audible through the soundproof walls. "Come in."

Agent Bodii swiftly entered and closed the door, saluting to his superior. "Sir, I'm sorry to disturb you so unexpectedly."

Agent Powers Sr., who hailed from a long, proud line of Powers Agents to have served the department and likely many more to come, dug out a case of cigars from one of his drawers and lit it up in preparation for the conversation. "I'm sure you are."

"But I just received this new case file on my desk, and I–" His voice broke off, frustration galvanizing his usually flat tone. "Sir, I know that I do not have the years of experience under my belt that others may have, but I believe that I have proven myself more than capable enough to handle worthy cases. Not grunt work–"

he sneered out, propping his briefcase on top of the desk, clicking open the latch, and slamming down the folders of papers. "–investigating bottom-of-the-barrel fugitives!"

He flipped the top folder open to reveal a mug shot of an ordinary guy smiling crookedly for the camera with a thumbs up. The placard that he held read "Stanley Pines".

"I've read through his history, and it's filled with the most inane crimes I've ever heard! Sham towels, rip-off bandaids, faulty vacuum cleaners, pug smuggling?! Why on earth would you assign me to someone like him?!"

Agent Powers Sr. took a long drag before he responded, puffing out a perfect circular ring of smoke that blasted into his inferior's face. "Listen Agent Bodii, you may be promising, but you're still a newbie. There are some unimaginable phenomena that even the pros have trouble covering up. Stanley Pines may seem like your average lowlife, but his new act gives us enough reason to worry. Bring up his latest file for me."

The underling dutifully shuffled the documents to the newest update. Dressed in a new pseudonym and suit, "Sylvan Poplarleaf""s act wasn't a huge departure from his usual M.O. of marketing janky products or engineering petty scams. While it was rather hackneyed to use such a stereotypical cultish symbol as the face of his new pyramid scheme, this hack had proven that he wasn't above anything when it came to making a quick buck.

Powers placed his ashtray over the triangular symbol used in one of the conman's advertisements, covering its unblinking eye. "You're from Kansas, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ever heard of a town called 'Orchard Lake'?"

"I can't say I have."

"You wouldn't have. We made sure of it. It took a lot of work that we don't want to see undone." He snuffed out his cigar, the cinders flickering orange as they died, before focusing on his subordinate. "There are threats, supernatural threats, that constantly endanger this country, and none so persistent as the one Stanley Pines might be working for. We need to confirm the intel; that's why you've been assigned for this reconnaissance mission, understand? This is important, and I trust you'll be up for the task."

Agent Bodii straightened up even more stiffly, spine a perfect line, as he snapped to attention. "I understand completely. I won't let you down, Agent Powers!"

"Yeah, yeah." The performative salute was waved off. "Head down to the archives before you go. They'll teach you everything we know about that monster."

The young operative turned to leave, hand on the knob, when his boss called out to him.

"Oh, and, Agent Bodii?"

“Sir?”

“Do not engage with your target under any circumstances. Confirm and get out. That’s an order.”

Agent Bodii snaps out of the remembrance as Stanley calls out to the last of the stragglers, “Don’t forget to buy gold!” The schmoozing smile is then shucked off like it’s just another piece of his costume. “Suckers.”

Inwardly reprimanding himself for dazing out at such a critical moment, the spy crouches down low and peeks out from behind the collection of trunks. The stand has been cleaned out save for a few snowglobes and bobbleheads, so it only takes one trip to carry everything to the car, which is still a bit of a balancing act. He silently stalks his target from a safe distance, following the protocol he had been quizzed on endlessly before he was sent out, as Stan mutters to himself. A red El Diablo is parked in front of the park’s opposite entrance, and with one solid kick from its owner, the trunk door flies open.

The folding table and clothing racks are wrestled in, the empty bags that once held the merchandise are stacked on top, and finally the earnings are kissed sweetly before the sack gets stashed into a secret, modified compartment underneath the back row. Stan frowns thoughtfully, humming absentmindedly as he peruses his stock, and the agent is just about to end it for the day and turn off the tape recorder when his mark’s body suddenly convulses.

As if struck by a lightning bolt, legs skew akimbo, chest jolts like it's about to burst from the inside, one arm spasms, and the other arm reaches up to claw along the left side of the face. Bodii freezes in shock at the disturbing display, brain buffering with indecision, but before he can even jump into action, it stops.

Stan's body rapidly relaxes, the muscles un-tensing while the posture shifts back to approximately normal, like the manic energy is literally seeping out from its pores. The left hand drags down the defined jaw as it unhinges to speak.

"Well, well, well; look at you, Mr. Superstar! You're drawing in bigger crowds nowadays. Guess that means you're really spreading your name out there."

It's...that's *not* Stanley Pines. Instead of the gruff baritone, low and raspy as if constantly hoarse from yelling, it's high and nasally, the shrill pitch ringing through the air and funneling into his ear canal.

Agent Bodii stares with increasing confusion, inching towards the precipice of a realization, as Stan responds to himself in his normal voice. "My name and your creepy eye. I can't believe people actually wear and put up that junk inside their house."

"With the way YOU sell it, how could they not?! Besides, back in Ciphertology's glory days, I convinced a whole HORDE of humans to shave their heads and tattoo my eye onto their foreheads."

The left hand loosely pulls at the slicked back chocolate locks, the gel finally wearing off as the strands stick up wildly in all directions. “They were the epitome of style!”

“What happened to laying low for now? Until you find your next victim–I mean *partner*,” Stan corrects in a manner that implies it wasn’t a slip of the tongue. “An army of bald freaks is sure to get you in trouble with the feds again. Besides, I’m not shaving my head for any cult leader, you included.”

The fingers rake through the mop tantalizingly slow, as if savoring the experience. “Fine by me. I think I’d miss this rat’s nest if you wiped your cranium clean.”

“Oh, quit it, Cyclops.” The right lightly smacks the left as the corresponding side of the mouth curls up.

“You first, Hot Shot,” the left teases back. “Besides, I think you wear *this*,” it detangles itself from the gummed fibers as the body pivots away from the car trunk to face the tree trunks. It traces along the triangular scar, but it is the eye sitting in the center that has the spy mesmerized in horror. The sclera is a sickening shade of yellow, as if there’s an acute illness incubating deep inside. The brown iris glows with a lick of blue flames, dancing in a ring around the dark pupil. “*perfectly*.”

Cheeks bloom a ruddy rose as the blood rushes into Stan’s face. “Ass kisser.”

“Yours? Sure!”

They cackle in tandem together, a harmonious mirror of Jekyll and Hyde. Agent Bodii stays shielded from sight by the trees, but his eyelids seem to grow heavier and heavier with each passing second, and it's becoming a burden to keep them open. Only his resolve keeps them stubbornly glued in place.

He should stop the tape and call it quits here. This is more than enough evidence to complete the mission. He has to head back to HQ so that the team can strategize the next steps.

Do not engage with your target under any circumstances. Confirm and get out. That's an order.

...but he *really* wants to know what happens next. Just a little bit more. He's already here, isn't he? He might as well gather more intel. After all, they seem *very* preoccupied with each other. The rest of the world might as well not exist. He carefully slips out his notepad again and clicks open his pen to continue his written observations.

When the laughter naturally putters out, the unnatural voice pipes up again. "So, how much dough did you rake in today?"

"Like you don't know already." But Stan seemingly can't resist boasting, "Over two-thousand dollars!"

"Remind me again, is that a lot for this decade?"

"Whaddya mean?! It's the most money I've ever seen in my life!"

“There you have it!” Comes the satisfied reply. “I told you this role would be a good fit for you and your skills, Stan! You gotta have a little more faith in your interdimensional pal!”

The right hand fiddles with the contents in the trunk, taking out a crowbar with flakes of rust smattering its claw to better situate the bags in the back. “I’ve never been a faithful kind of guy.”

“Aww, not even for *me?*” The voice tries to simper, and it would have almost been convincing if it didn't sound like a plea.

Stan hesitates. “...Not even for you.”

“Hmmmm, liar.”

“So are you.”

A long, put-upon sigh is drawn out melodramatically. “Y’know, if you *really* don't like this gig, I can always speed up the process and reach out to For—”

“No need for that!” The sly proposal is interrupted as fast as it’s posed. “I’ll find you the dorkiest, brainest, geniusiest scientist on the planet who makes even Sixer look like a dunce to build you your portal! You see how well I’ve been doing, and I’m just getting started!”

The grin contorts and twists like rubber, stretching up to the cheekbones and all the way down to the chin. A perfect half moon glimmering with enamel and gold.

“Of course you are. You’re my top performer, after all! The star of my show!” The left hand patronizingly pats the right cheek, its hue putting the red fire hydrants lining the street to shame. “How would I get by without you?”

Stanley scoffs but leans into the touch, rubbing the meat of his cheek against his own wayward palm. “I’m sure you'd convince some other schmuck to do your dirty work for you.”

“But none as good as you. You were born a liar, Stanley.” The fingers bend and dig the blunt, chewed up nails into the flesh. “You were meant for this.”

Meant for me fills in the empty gaps perfectly.

In that moment, Agent Bodii’s weary eyes finally snap shut, and the world flashes brilliantly. When the brightness recedes, the scenery’s been drained of all color, and there is someone standing in front of Stanley.

No, that’s inaccurate. This person is *floating* in front of the stout human, with onyx-colored appendages that resemble legs dangling behind him as a noodley arm possessively cups Stan’s face with four fingers. Exactly where the human’s left hand rests.

And...this is *not* a person. If it is, it’s unlike any person he’s met in this life. The central body is seemingly solid, textured like a pyramid with divots that resemble mortar joints. The gold exoskeleton wrapping around the entirety of the angular shape reminds him of the underside of a turtle’s carapace.

A triangle, it vacantly registers somewhere in his terrified subconscious. That is a triangle.

He recalls the sensitive reports he was given clearance to peruse in the basement, half-incredulous at the severe warnings that were strictly issued for such a silly concept. It had been almost laughable at the time that one of the most dangerous threats to their universe was merely a shape he learned about in high school geometry class. There's nothing funny about it now, especially since it is looking at him from the corner of that huge, omniscient eye.

Hold on a moment, I've been meaning to deal with this peeping Tom for a while.

The broadcasted message presses against his forebrain, telepathically inserting itself so that it fires across his synapses from neuron to neuron to neuron. He collapses to his knees with an agonized shout, clutching his head. The skin burns as his pulse thrums into his temples, and he feels as if his brain is about to *explode*. He manages to raise his head, squinting blearily through the thin crack between his eyelids.

There it is, hovering just above him. That fathomless pupil, deeper and darker and emptier than outer space, bores into his very soul and beyond.

Bill Cipher

The bottom lid crinkles up, apparently amused.

This little piggy got lost on his way to the market! Looks like we'll have to take him to the butcher's ourselves! Knock 'em out, Stanley!

Agent Bodii weakly attempts to shield his face with a raised hand, but he's no match against the crowbar, swung hard and true against the side of his skull with a grisly *CRACK*.

Wait, wait, wait–lemme handle the tape recorder but take the journal. I wanna read the fanfiction he wrote about us.

"The wha—?"

And then he knows no more.

~

Agent Powers Sr. had just hung up his office phone, stretching out a crick in his neck, when one of his subordinates burst through the door. "Sir, it's him! The missing Bodii! He's here!"

"Here?" He hurriedly stands up and follows his frantic employee into the office space, where the babel of wordless shrieks are starting to filter through the open door. "Just *what* has that knucklehead been up to–"

Something small and smooth ricochets off the tip of his nose and plinks to the ground. Befuddled, he bends down, picks it up, and observes an opaque piece of hardened milk under the ceiling light between pinched fingers. "A tooth...?"

His subordinate just points, and he follows after it.

There, getting chased by two other operatives, is Agent Noe Z. Bodii. In a manner most unprofessional for this professional, he's running around erratically through the rows of cubicles and jumping over the dividers. He flings a couple of teeth behind him, babbling nonsensically all the while as he dodges another tackle attempt.

The straight-laced newbie is nowhere to be seen in the crazed, deranged eyes that have sunken so deep in this man's sockets, head unevenly shaved and an unfortunately familiar tattooed on his forehead. When his pursuers finally manage to grab him and force him down to his knees, Agent Powers cautiously approaches.

"So, you didn't listen to me," he notes dully, carefully extending his hand into the inside of the restrained agent's trench coat and plucking out the tape recorder. He presses the playback button.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA–"

The blaring cachinnation that plays out is seemingly endless and completely rewrites anything else that might have been recorded on it. Is it a declaration of war or a warning?

He clicks it off. "What a shame."

Agent Bodii peers up at him, sanguine tears streaming like a crimson river along the smile lines of his face, mouth all gums and no teeth as it flaps open wide. A grotesque, grown-up baby in both appearance and mental faculties.

Agent Powers waves a dismissive hand, and the ruined man is hauled away to be…taken care of. “That’s what you get for being a nosey body.”

He pauses, glancing around at his subordinates. “Get it? Because his name sounds like—”

“No, no; we get it, Boss.”

“Yeah, it was pretty clever.”

“Thank you, I was recently diagnosed with a rare disorder that impairs my sense of humor, so I wasn’t sure if it landed.”

– walkingwindbreakr215

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A big thank you to all of our contributors for their time, talent, and patience on this project. They were the heart and soul of this zine, and I couldn't have done it without them <3 THANK YOU!

Best couple of 2025-2026 award
CASINO
Zmw gsvb orevw z xizab ufm veri zugvi ! xoxo
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REALITY